

Analyses of American school staff survey on modern alternative schools efficiency

Análisis de la encuesta del personal escolar estadounidense sobre la eficacia de las escuelas alternativas modernas

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ABSTRACT:

The article shows the peculiarities of contemporary alternative schools in the United States. For the analysis of current voucher, charter and magnet schools in the USA, we conducted a survey with teachers and managers of 32 schools from 17 U.S. States. The results of the survey enabled the authors to practically prove the assertion about the flexibility of curricula, variability of the educational process, opportunities to respond to the students' needs and to modify the entire educational process in accordance with the learners' needs, using diverse methods and learner-centred approach, building an individual route for each student of the alternative school. It is important to note that the results of the questionnaire survey did not only prove the hypothesis about the effective functioning of such schools, but we also established scientific cooperation and exchange of experience to many American schools.

Key words: education in the USA, alternative school, school choice, charter school, voucher school, magnet school, variability, curriculum, efficiency.

RESUMEN:

El artículo muestra las peculiaridades de las escuelas alternativas contemporáneas en los Estados Unidos. Para el análisis de las escuelas actuales de bonos, carácter e imán en los EE.UU., realizamos una encuesta con profesores y directores de 32 escuelas de 17 Estados Unidos. Los resultados de la encuesta permitieron a los autores probar prácticamente la aseveración sobre la flexibilidad de los currículos, la variabilidad del proceso educativo, las oportunidades de responder a las necesidades de los alumnos y modificar todo el proceso educativo de acuerdo con las necesidades de los alumnos, Métodos y enfoque centrado en el alumno, construyendo una ruta individual para cada estudiante de la escuela alternativa. Es importante señalar que los resultados de la encuesta por cuestionario no sólo probaron la hipótesis sobre el funcionamiento efectivo de esas escuelas, sino que también establecimos cooperación científica e intercambio de experiencias a muchas escuelas estadounidenses.

Palabras clave: educación en los Estados Unidos,

1. Introduction

The system of alternative schools is widely spread all over the world. A special attention in modernization of education system and the development of alternative education is paid in the United States. This country has established stable alternative models of education implementing achievements of the best global practices of many American researchers. The peculiarities, contents and methods of alternative education in the U.S. are discussed in the works by B. Jacobs (1994), Y. Nagata (2007), B.M. Raywid (1990), T. W. Young (1990), R. A. Valeeva, D. I. Vafina (2014), T.V. Tsyrlina (1999), D.R. Gilazova (2009), I.N. Vetrova (2008) and others. B. Jacobs gave vital recommendations for alternative education in the USA. Y. Nagata showed global perspectives relevant to the Asia-Pacific Region in the alternative education. B.M. Raywid proposed a general typology of alternative education. T. W. Young analyzes public alternative education, options and choices for modern schools in the USA. R. A. Valeeva, D. I. Vafina dedicated their work to the comparative study of American and Russian students' attitude towards alternative education. T.V. Tsyrlina researches the phenomenon of humanistic author school in the twentieth century educational culture. D.R. Gilazova's work is devoted to the development of alternative education in Commonwealth countries. I.N. Vetrova analyses the development of alternative secondary education in the United States (second half of the twentieth century).

It is necessary to notice that in the USA the term "alternative school" is traditionally used in two meanings: to name schools for children with disabilities and to name nontraditional public and private educational programs available to parents and students to choose from. In this study, we relied on the second definition, understanding charter, voucher and magnet schools to be alternative.

The purpose of this article is to show the key points of such schools' functioning; the authors focus on flexibility, variability and greater freedom in such schools, which allow to achieve greater educational outcomes.

2. Methods

The study was held in 32 alternative schools in 17 states of the USA. Such methods of survey as questionnaires, interviews with headmasters and teachers of schools were used. (<https://goo.gl/forms/skinH3Fn9zcyXegP2>) The questionnaire contained an appeal to the respondents whom we asked to answer questions aiming at analysing the effectiveness of their work, stipulating that the results of the survey will be published in a thesis for the degree of doctor of pedagogical sciences and in scientific articles. The appeal also contained the author's profile in the scientific electronic library. The fact that the survey was conducted anonymously was of particular importance, respondents had to indicate only the name of the school, the type of the alternative school and the state in the USA.

3. Results

To analyse the functioning of contemporary alternative schools in the USA not only their experience on the basis of the annual reports was studied, but also the results of the interviews with leaders and teachers in charter, magnet, and voucher schools in the US. Representatives from 32 schools participated in the survey (Montessori Regional Charter School, Sacred Heart, Juneau Community Charter School, Kaleidoscope School of Arts and Sciences, Connor Academy Charter School, Pearson Early Childhood School, Ivy Academy, The Mosaic School, Lincoln Charter School, 21st Century Preparatory, Alturas International Academy, Rocklin Academy family of schools (4 schools), Kona Pacific Public Charter School, Discovery Charter School,

Ledyard Charter School and others) from 17 states of the USA (New York, Pennsylvania,, Wisconsin, Idaho, Nevada, Texas, California, Maryland, Illinois, South Carolina, Alaska, District of Columbia, Tennessee, Hawaii, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Florida). Here and hereafter, we present the percentage of respondents. The greatest number of responses was received from the States of California and Wisconsin (16% per each of the total percentages involved). When doing quantitative data processing, the calculation of the frequency of each answer's occurrence was held in absolute (number of answers) and relative (percentage) indicators, and we also took into account the frequency of missing answers.

The first block of the questionnaire consisted of five organizational questions related to the type of the alternative school, the number of students, their level and subject area. When writing the questions of the first block of the questionnaire we were guided by the task to consider the structure of the educational environment and the principles of its organization. Respondents' answers in the first block of the questionnaire confirmed that alternative schools in the United States implement individual, subjective learning process, in which each part and the conditions of its existence (teacher, student, social status, level of teaching) play an important role in constructing the educational environment.

The greatest number of responses was received from charter schools (73.9 per cent) and the lowest — from the voucher ones (10,9 %) and magnet schools (15.2%) This result is logical, because charter schools received a preferential distribution in the United States, thanks to the support of former U.S. President Barak Obama and current President Donald Trump, who made an emphasis on the development and financing of such schools in his election campaign.

The second question of the questionnaire allowed us to determine the number of students in a particular school. There was no aim to specify more than 500 students in the school as the alternative school are distinguished by small classes and individualized approach to the educational process. The educational environment should be subjective for each student to express himself as its integral part. Only the individualized approach can contribute to this as it allows to focus on the needs of each student in a small class size, so that he could show himself and contribute to the educational process construction. The individualized approach gives more time for the disclosure of the student's personal experience and his creativity, which, of course, brings him or her to the fore as the main subject of educational process: him, not the teacher. Thus, the second question related to the number of students allows us to see how the limited number of school students helps achieve the educational process efficiency.

The answers to the second question clearly illustrate that the total number of students at alternative schools does not exceed 500 persons: the given variant of answer was not selected by any of the survey participants. Half of the respondents (50%) indicated that the enrolment in their alternative schools exceeds 300, but is not more than 500. The other half of the respondents indicated that their schools enrolled even fewer students: fewer than 300 students (15.2 %), fewer than 200 students (26,1%), fewer than 150 students (4.3%) and fewer than 100 pupils (4.3 %). These results indicate that in the USA alternative schools, educational space is subjectively oriented, able to take into account the individual needs of each student.

The third question of the questionnaire was aimed at identifying the social status of the respondent in every school. The greatest number of responses (32) was derived from the teachers, which made up 69.6%, 13 answers from the school administration (28.3%) and 1 answer — from an assistant (to 2.2%). Social status can be considered as some context that explains the behavior of the educational process subject, identifies his/her role and methods of work at school. This criterion has become leading in the preparation of the survey and evaluating the results of respondents' answers. As the teacher is the source element of the educational process and is directly involved in its construction, we were not surprised by the fact that the majority of respondents were teachers.

The answers to question 4 of the questionnaire suggest that the majority of respondents work in elementary (47,8%) and secondary (32.6%) levels of alternative schools. The 5th question of the questionnaire was devoted to identifying the subject area in which the respondent

teaches: technical science, humanities, social science. The greatest number of responses were from charter schools from primary school teachers who teach both natural science and humanities.

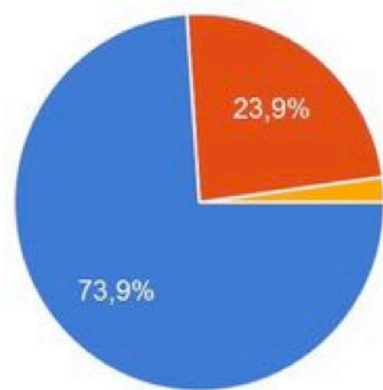
As every element of the educational environment is important, as well as the environment in which it is located in the modern education system, we were interested in other elements of the educational environment: curriculum, timetables, forms of study. They have become the criteria in the basement of questions of the second block of the questionnaire.

The sixth question was aimed at identifying the percentage of elective courses in alternative schools. The results of the survey showed that the percentage of electives is low in primary school: more than half of the respondents (56,5%) answered that there are less than 15% of such items in their schools. As for the survey on course selection in secondary and senior school, entirely different results were obtained. 32.6% of respondents chose the answer about their school suggesting less than 20% of elective courses. Almost the same percentage of respondents (30,4%), according to their own estimates, claim that in secondary and senior schools electives make more than 30% of the total number of subjects.

The 6th question was aimed at identifying the proportion of elective courses in alternative schools. The results of the survey showed that in primary school, the percentage of electives is low: more than a half of respondents (56.5 %) reported having less than 15% of such subjects at school. 30.4% of respondents indicated that electives make up more than 30% of the total number in secondary and senior schools and 32.6% of the respondents said that such subjects make fewer than 20%. Almost the same percentage of respondents (30,4%), according to their own estimates, say that electives make up more than 30% of the total number in senior and secondary schools. It is noteworthy that 10.9 % of respondents said that such subjects make even more than 50 % in their schools. It is important to note that 12 respondents did not know the answer to this question. Obviously, they worked at a junior level, so could not possess such information. In our opinion, the increasing number of variable subjects in the secondary and senior school witnesses, first and foremost, of the refusal from structure, hierarchy of education. Learning and the educational environment itself are no longer the atmosphere of violence against the student.

Then we decided to go for curriculum. Therefore, the seventh question (Figure 1) was associated with the identification of the respondents' opinions about whether the curriculum in their alternative schools is flexible. The results of the survey confirm that the vast majority of respondents (73.9 %) said that their schools used a flexible curriculum. The use of such curricula allows, in our opinion, to consider learning as a partnership project, which reflects the teachers' ability to work in a freely-formed team and to be responsible for their work and for the actions of others, allows to change inefficient organizational elements.

7. Is your school curriculum flexible?



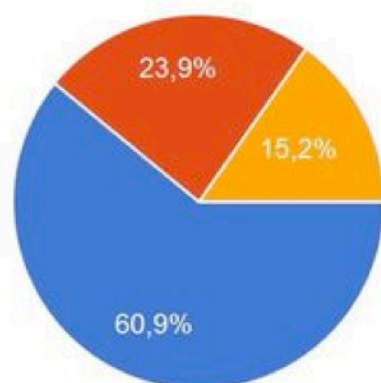
Yes	34	73.9%
No	11	23.9%
Don't know	1	2.2%

Figure 1. The diagram for distribution of responses to question 7.

The answers to question 8 (Figure 2) showed that the curriculum in most alternative schools is compiled individually for every student, which allows to create the necessary conditions for

providing the students with objective knowledge and for creating the conditions for their development and self-development within the school environment.

8. Is the timetable based on the students' requirements?



Response	Count	Percentage
Yes	28	60.9%
No	11	23.9%
Don't know	7	15.2%

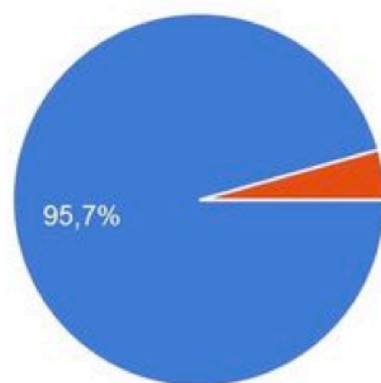
Figure 2. The diagram for distribution of responses to question 8.

As the most important subject in the educational environment is the student and his needs, it was important for us to investigate what needs are considered while preparing the curriculum. Therefore, in the 8th question of the questionnaire we suggested a selection of needs: cognitive, social and communicative. The results of the survey showed that the vast majority of respondents (89.3 %) chose the cognitive needs, which quite rightly points at the degree of the student's involvement in the educational environment and awareness of his role and the measure of one's participation.

Cognitive needs are needs of self-realization, creative activity, knowledge of the world, which is an indicator of one's developing critical thinking and attitude to the world. It is this type of thinking and its formation that constitute the main objective of the educational environment in the modern world.

The 9th question of the questionnaire (Figure 3) was devoted to studying the possibility of building an individual route for each student in alternative schools. The responses to this question showed that the vast majority (95.7 %) of respondents agreed that their schools develop individual plans for students. Moreover, in the review, it was noted that an individual plan for each student is mandatory at their school, which once again confirms the importance of each component of the educational environment: from curriculum and schedules to specific forms of training.

9. Are individual plans for students allowed in your school?



Response	Count	Percentage
Yes	44	95.7%
No	2	4.3%
Don't know	0	0%

Figure 3. The diagram for distribution of responses to question 9.

When answering the 10th question (Figure 4) the respondents were to specify how frequently the content of education was updated in accordance with the trends of the time. We obtained the following results: the majority of respondents (60,9%) noted that the content of education in their schools changed as often as necessary; 19,6% of the respondents chose the answer on the annual update of educational content. The results confirm the need to consider education as part of a wider social and cultural environment, subject to the same changes as the

environment itself. Moreover, the educational environment is constructed continuously, it is no longer static, it is changeable and polyvariative.

10. How often do you update the educational content according to the spirit of the times?

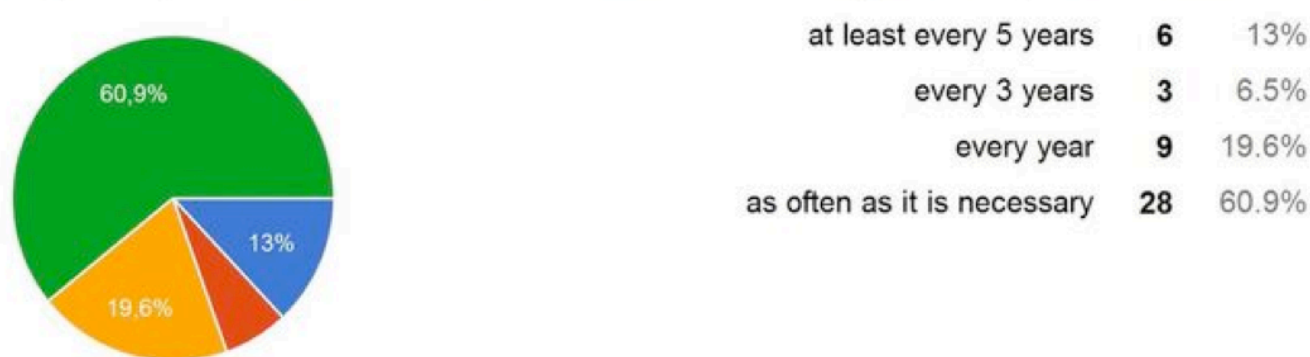


Figure 4. The diagram for distribution of responses to question 10.

Rejection of the binarism principle in training, the educational focus on the search for gifted children defines the construction of a highly individualized, student-centered approach to learning. Therefore, it was important for us to see how the formal approach to knowledge inspection in the form of testing expresses the real needs of students and allows to notice their individuality. Quite expected was the fact that we obtained 93.5 % of negative responses to the 11th question about whether tests are the only form of student assessment. It demonstrates a great variety of assessment tools in the USA and refutes the myth that only the test checks the students' knowledge. The answers to this question prove that the learning process is impossible without consideration of the students' individual needs or without analysis of his thinking. The teacher should focus not so much on the result but on the decision-making process, the analysis of why the student thinks so.

When analysing the internal components of the educational environment it is impossible to ignore forms of learning. In the classical education, that was the plan and the summary of the lesson, so the 12th question of our questionnaire was associated with the role of plan and summary of the lesson in the educational process planning. When answering this question the majority of respondents (60,9 %) disagreed that they rely only on the plan and the summary of the lesson in their professional activities. These results indicate the teachers' free choice of the educational process specifics without relying of formal requirements and formalized procedures of study, without strict regulation of the learning process, which places it within certain limits.

Answering the 13th question of the questionnaire (Figure 5) about whether the lessons' content changes with a particular topic depending on the learning situation, 87% of respondents answered positively and only 13% negatively. The dependence of the lessons, themes, and applied forms of learning on the training situation indicates the coherence and readability of the educational environment, its dependence on all of the conditions of its components' existence.

13. Can the content of the lesson be changed in accordance with the situation?



Figure 5. The diagram for distribution of responses to question 13.

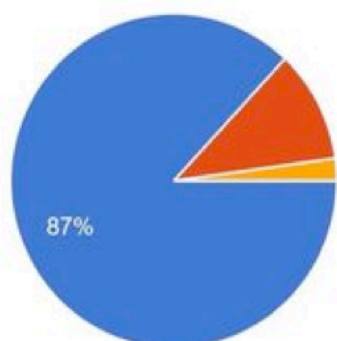
The variability of the training is aimed at expanding forms of teaching with the aim of

identifying the creative cognitive approach to the students' needs themselves. To confirm its implementation in alternative schools in the U.S. we asked the 14th question about a possibility to do the tasks in an unconventional way (project, essay, story, poem). The responses to this question showed that 89,1% of respondents reported having this possibility in their schools. It confirms that the educational environment has a decentred structure. There are also multiplying new form of studies that point at the organization of such training in the subject in which the learning process is presented in the context of interrelated elements – forms of learning. Each of them focuses on a more private task, that of identifying the needs of each learner.

Analysing the responses to the 15th question of the questionnaire on the methods used in the work, we can conclude that interactive (91,3% of the respondents chose this answer) and active (58.7 % chose it) methods prevail in alternative schools of the USA. This tendency indicates the connectedness and readability of the educational environment that cannot exist without a feedback, being constantly created between teacher and student.

The vast majority of respondents (87 %) answering question 16 of the questionnaire (Figure 6) believe that in their schools, teacher and student are equal components of a single learning process. These results clearly demonstrate a change in approach to learning: it has no more centered strictly defined character; it is reversible: not only the teacher actively influences the student, but also the student influences the teacher.

16. Are the teacher and the students equal participants of the educational area who can construct their mutual cooperation?



Yes	40	87%
No	5	10.9%
Don't know	1	2.2%

Figure 6. The diagram for distribution of responses to question 16.

It is noteworthy that the absolute majority of positive answers that the teacher and the student are equal parts in the single school process, jointly structuring the space of interaction, the majority of respondents (95.7 %), answering the 17th question of the questionnaire agreed that the main determinant of this space is the teacher. This result shows that, despite the trend to go away from binary's approach in training, the system itself, after all, must have a leading, basic element, which specifies the coordinates of the educational environment existence, in other words, it fulfils the function of the rhizome in the absence of a dedicated "centre".

The next important question for consideration was whether the school had a student-centered approach. When answering the 18th question of the questionnaire, most of the respondents (60,9%) indicated that they implemented a student-centered approach to learning in their alternative schools. It proved the postulate that any system, including the educational environment, is effective only when it is designed freely and without boundaries by those entities, which can not only master it, but also realize themselves in it.

The third block of the questionnaire is focused on professionalism and the role of the teacher in alternative schools. Here the responses to question 19 of the questionnaire about whether the school teachers speak some foreign language, demonstrate a disappointing conclusion. More than a half (52.2 %) of respondents take the position that teachers at their school do not speak foreign languages. Only 6.5% of respondents, according to their own estimates, acknowledged that most of the teachers in their schools speak a foreign language.

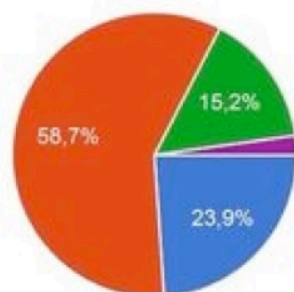
The responses to the 20th question of the survey about whether there are courses for the secondary school teachers' training to teach the most gifted students also did not confirm our assumption about the focus on talented children and working with them. Answering this question, 58.7 % of the respondents answered negatively, and only 26.1% of respondents agreed that such courses are conducted.

The answers to the 21st question of the questionnaire, devoted to the study of respondents' opinions about the teachers' awareness of the latest trends in education, gave the following results. The vast majority of respondents (71.7 %) believe that teachers are aware of innovations in education at the state level, just over a half (54.3%) believe that teachers are informed at the country level, slightly less than a half (47,8%) speak about the level of the professional community, and only 8.7% speak about the level of the world, and 2.2% speak about the level of UNESCO. These results only show a deep awareness of the teachers and their interest in the professional field.

The responses on the survey question 22 showed that 32.6% of respondents believe that the school should be built, basing on a certain concept, but the majority (54.3 %) take the position that it is appropriate to find what you need, choosing from several concepts. Only 13% of respondents do not have a clear position on this issue.

It should be noted that in the USA alternative school there is a clear tendency of considering the teacher an actor of social interaction, not the "center" who coordinates the educational process. Thus when answering the 23rd question (Figure 7) about the role of the teacher at school, the majority of respondents (58.7 %) chose the variant "mentor". However, 23.9% of respondents believe that the teacher is the authority. We shall note that principals, not by teachers provided these answers. 15,2 % of the respondents take the position that the teacher is an equal participant of the educational process.

23. The teacher in your school is...



an authority	11	23.9%
a mentor	27	58.7%
a mediator	0	0%
an equal member of educational process	7	15.2%
Other	1	2.2%

Figure 7. The diagram for distribution of responses to question 23.

The 24th question about whether the alternative school teacher can combine other abilities gave the following answers. Teachers of alternative schools in addition to teaching, according to the respondents, combine the talents of a scientist (84,8 %), a writer (89,1%), an actor (73,9 %), a poet (73,9 %), a musician (58.7 %), other professions (47,85%). We shall note that there is a position (2,2 %) that the teacher has only to teach, to be engaged in his immediate professional activity.

These results indicate trends in the changing role of teachers today. On the one hand, this profession representatives need to adapt to social changes and to reflect them in their activities, to be ready to interact in the education system with all participants of the educational process. At the same time, on the other hand, a teacher should be a personality possessing the qualities, which attract students' attention. He needs to be able to interest them not only by the level of one's professionalism and honest attitude towards labor. Only the helping teacher, who is a creative personality himself, can create conditions for the students' development and self-development by his own example.

That is why the teacher should have different competencies, demonstrating his adaptability to social changes and the degree of social activity in the educational space, which also reflects his

being focused on the personality-oriented education. Analysing the most valuable qualities for alternative school teachers (no more than three were marked), the respondents answered the 25th question and gave the first place to communicative skills (78.3 %), followed by a positive attitude to the students (60.9%) and creativity (56.5 %).

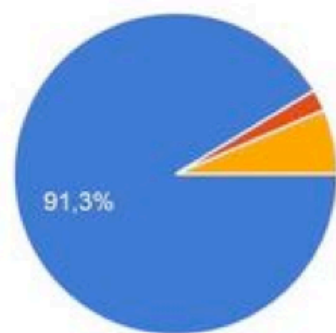
The fourth block of questions was aimed at obtaining more information about alternative schools. Thus, the answers to the 26th question in the questionnaire reveal the specifics of extracurricular work, if available. The vast majority (87%) of respondents agreed that extracurricular activities are organized in their schools. If the answer was positive, respondents were asked to name the types of extracurricular work in their alternative school. We obtained the following results from 34 respondents: sporting sections (basketball, athletics, football, cricket, tennis, chess, dance), robotics, LEGO League, theatre club, choir, additional foreign languages, art studio, poetry studio, "science fair", edition of the school newspaper.

In the 27th question of the questionnaire we asked the respondents to note the ethnic groups of students in their schools. The survey revealed that in most cases (supported by more than 60% of respondents) native Americans, Mexicans and African Americans study at these schools. There are also schools, which have children of other nationalities. These responses reflect the multinational public of alternative schools and their availability to all students regardless of nationality and race.

The 28th question answers about whether acts of violence, vandalism and hooliganism happen at schools showed the following results: 45.7% of respondents believe that such a case has never happened over the last 2-3 years; 34.8% of the respondents noted that there were some of those cases; 17.4 % chose the option "sometimes" and 2.2% chose the variant "they happen often."

Answering the 29th question (Figure 8) of whether education at an alternative school has a higher quality than at a traditional one, 91.3% of the respondents gave positive answers and only 2.2% answered negatively.

29. Do you think that teaching in your school is more effective than in a traditional one?



Yes	42	91.3%
No	1	2.2%
Don't know	3	6.5%

Figure 8. The diagram for distribution of responses to question 29.

4. Discussion

Answers to questions 26-28 indicate a high degree of demand for alternative education in the United States today and reflect the trends taking place in the American society: social and cultural changes as well as a number of problems, ethnic conflicts and social conflicts as an integral part of the American system of education.

Responding to the last, 30th question of the questionnaire, respondents analysed the advantages and disadvantages of alternative schools in which they work. They highlighted the following advantages (quotes):

- freedom for students and teachers, much less nonsensical bureaucracy;
- flexible curriculum/a rigorous curriculum;
- many extracurricular activities,
- individual approach; individual education plans;

- character development lessons are interwoven throughout the curriculum with a special emphasis on kindness and respect; flexibility to adjust lessons to the class; possibility to change our program to meet student's needs; flexible classes allow individualization of each student's education;
- smaller classes and family environment, small class sizes, small school community; smaller classes and family environment;
- school focusing on providing a safe environment for students to learn; friendly atmosphere, close to children;
- parents' involvement, parents are welcome to come and observe or help out in the school, the families are very committed to the school's mission;
- over time this has developed into a school where children are courteous, and exceptionally well behaved. Our students are very successful when they advance to high school; students get better knowledge of subjects; all students can achieve high levels; all students are obedient;
- personally oriented approach; our school teachers are of the highest quality and reputation. They are well treated and respected and so they do not need to be a part of a teacher union. We have an honorable reputation in the community. 'Habits of the Mind and Habits of Professionalism' allow students to experientially learn through their thinking that is facilitated by a teacher. Our teaching staff is more professional and experienced - We help our students develop their knowledge of a certain discipline; in this school teachers train future specialists from a young age).

With regard to shortcomings, 13 respondents identified the following ones:

- educational experience varies greatly from class to class; not a lot of structure for teachers; the structure is rigid; educational experience varies greatly from class to class); (It is a TONE of work for the advisors).
- Students are on the computer too much; it doesn't suit some children because they are not interested in technicals).
- (Low funding) (no gymnasium, no lunchroom, low speed teachers; we do not provide transportation to or from school.
- We do not provide food. Parents are required to send their children to school with their own lunch).

The questionnaire suggested the possibility for respondents to write their comments, suggestions and questions. Three responses were received saying that the school has no senior and secondary levels, there was a wish to include traditional, private, and religious schools into the survey.

- This is a K-6 elementary school - No Secondary students
 - The majority of students in America attend public school, which is funded through property taxes. Please add that option to your survey if you want more accurate data. You might also add Christian school to choice of school as well as private school.
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5. Conclusions

In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education defined an alternative school as "a public elementary/secondary school that addresses need of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides non-traditional education, serves as an adjunct to regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education" (Vetrova, 2008). It is these schools, their processes, and structures, which were the main interest of this study. The purpose of the public school questionnaire was to obtain information about public schools such as grades offered, number of students enrolled, staffing patterns, teaching vacancies, high school graduation rates, programs and services offered, and college application rates. The phenomenon under discussion proved to be really relevant in the nowadays American reality (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Getting the evaluation from the forefront specialists lets us realize the inner structure and specifics of the schools under analyses. Thus, the results of the study showed that currently, the system of alternative education in the United States is in demand. In the system of school education, there are internal structural changes related to the need for the school staff, teachers to reconsider their place and role in the new system of education, and the need to adapt to these changes. It indicates the need of reforming the system of education with accentuation on the choice of methods, forms, facilities of

educational process taking into account those social and cultural changes in American society and the world in general.

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[Índice]

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